

Selecting the appropriate horse feed in winter is less about selecting one “best” product and more about matching the diet to the horse’s seasonal energy needs, body condition score, workload, and access to forage. Low temperatures changes how horses use calories, how much roughage they need, and how important hydration and digestive health become. A balanced winter feeding plan starts with forage first, then adds hard feed only where it is needed for weight maintenance, performance, or extra support.

This guide covers the main types of horse feed, how to judge feed value, how to read a simple horse feeding chart, and when a complete horse feed or balancer makes sense. It also includes budget, common feeding mistakes, and practical horse feed advice uk owners can use throughout winter.

Why winter feeding needs change for horses

Winter feeding is not merely “more of the same.” Equines burn extra energy to keep warm through thermoregulation, especially when temperatures plummet, wind increases, or their coat and shelter are inadequate to help them stay comfortable. So winter energy needs can rise even if work doesn't change.

First to assess is body condition score. A horse that is already lean may lose weight quickly if feed intake is restricted or if the diet does not have enough calorie density. A horse that stays easy-keeping may need little additional hard feed overall, but still needs sufficient roughage for digestive health and regular energy intake.

Forage consumption is the foundation of winter feeding. Hay alongside haylage provide fibre, which helps support digestive health and helps maintain warmth through hindgut fermentation in the large intestine. A forage-led diet is usually the most sensible place to start, with hard feed added only if the horse cannot maintain condition, is in work, or needs extra protein, vitamins and minerals.

Cold weather also influences appetite, water intake, and feed digestibility. Horses often eat more forage when offered enough, but some reduce intake if the feed is inferior or hard to chew. That is why the best horse feed in winter is the one that complements forage, supports weight maintenance, and suits the individual horse’s body condition score.

Kinds of horse feed to consider in cold weather

There are many types of horse feed to choose from, but in winter the most practical options tend to fall into a few distinct categories. The right choice depends on whether your horse needs more energy, extra fibre, better digestibility, or a straightforward way to top up vitamins and minerals.

Complete horse feed is made to provide a balanced feed when fed at the recommended amount. It can be useful for horses that struggle to eat enough forage or need a reliable, consistent feeding plan. A complete horse feed can also reduce the need to mix various buckets of different products.

Mixes and cubes are traditional hard feed options. Mixes usually combine cereals, fibre sources, oil, and micronutrients, while cubes tend to be more uniform and easier to measure. These can be handy for horses needing a planned hard feed alongside forage, especially where the aim is to increase calorie intake without feeding big quantities.

Calorie-dense feed is ideal for horses that lose condition in winter, work regularly, or need extra fuel without a large increase in bucket size. Energy-dense feeds often use oil, digestible fibre, and controlled starch levels rather than relying heavily on starch and sugar.

Other practical options include conditioning feed, which is aimed at weight gain or maintaining condition, and a balancer, which supplies vitamins and minerals with very little calories. A ration balancer can be a good choice for horses on a forage-based diet that needs nutritional fine-tuning rather than more bulk.

When comparing horse feed companies, look at fibre, protein, starch levels, sugar content, and whether the feed is right for your horse's performance level. Product names matter less than the nutrition profile and how it fits the rest of the ration.

How to choose the best horse feed for your horse

Horse feed for beginners can feel unclear because every bag seems to claim condition, shine, performance, or calm behaviour. The easiest way to choose is to start with horse feeding rules: evaluate the horse, assess the forage, then fill the gaps.

Maturity and workload are key. A young horse, veteran, broodmare, or horse in regular work may need extra support than an easy-keeping horse at rest. A horse in low work often does best on forage and a balancer. A horse in moderate or hard work may need a more energy-dense hard feed or complete horse feed to cover extra calorie demand.

Digestive health should guide the decision too. Horses are designed for frequent intake of fibre, so anything that helps maintain gut health is beneficial. That means prioritising forage, avoiding sudden feed transition, and choosing feeds with sensible starch levels. Horses prone to digestive upset may do better on fibre-based feeds, chopped forage, or a balancer rather than a cereal-heavy ration.

Ask 3 questions before buying:

- Does the horse need weight gain, maintenance, or performance support?
- Is the current forage enough, or is the horse losing condition?
- Will this feed improve the ration without increasing starch and sugar too much?

If the answer points to straightforward maintenance, a balancer and forage may be enough. If the horse is thin, working hard, or struggling to eat enough, a conditioning feed or complete horse feed may be more suitable.

Horse feeding chart: how much to feed in winter

A horse feeding chart is a practical starting point, but it should always be adjusted using bodyweight, condition score, and forage quality. A horse feed calculator uk tool can help estimate daily intake, yet it should never replace hands-on observation.

In general, most horses should receive hay as the foundation of the ration, with hard feed added according to need. The forage ration is the most important part of winter feeding, because it supports hydration, warmth, and digestive health.

Follow the following basic winter guide:

- **Small pony or good-doer at rest:** forage-led ration, restricted hard feed, balancer if needed.
- **Typical horse in light work:** ad-lib or generous forage, small amount of hard feed or balancer.
- **Horse in regular work or losing weight:** more forage plus conditioning feed or complete horse feed.
- **Thin horse or poor doer:** increase forage first, then add calorie-dense feed if required.

Bodyweight matters because feed should be tailored to size rather than guessed. A larger horse typically needs more forage and a larger total ration, while a smaller horse may maintain on less. If you are unsure, weigh-tape estimates and condition score checks are better than eye-balling alone.

A sensible approach is to assess the horse weekly through winter. If weight is dropping, increase forage before increasing bucket feed. If the horse is holding condition, you may not need to change much at all. If the horse is getting too fat, reduce unnecessary calories while keeping forage available.

10 rules of feeding horses in winter

Effective winter feeding relies on consistent routines. These horse feeding rules may help you prevent common issues and keep the ration balanced during the colder months.

1. **Start with forage.** Make hay or haylage the foundation before adding hard feed.
2. **Offer smaller meals.** Big bucket feeds are less suitable than small meals given across the day.
3. **Offer fresh water.** Hydration matters in winter and supports gut function.
4. **Watch body condition score.** Adjust feed before the horse becomes too thin or too fat.
5. **Put fibre before starch.** Fibre is safer and more natural for the horse.
6. **Select digestible feeds.** Better digestibility supports better calorie use.
7. **Limit sudden changes.** Feed transition should be gradual to protect digestive health.
8. **Inspect the forage quality.** Poor hay may need supplement support or a better forage source.
9. **Match feed to workload.** The ration should reflect the horse's performance level.
10. **Review things weekly.** Weight, appetite, droppings, and behaviour all matter.

These rules matter especially where frost, mud, and limited turnout disrupt routine. A horse that spends more time stabled may need different calorie support than one with access to grass, but in both cases forage and freshness matter most.

When a complete horse feed is appropriate

A complete horse feed is a good option when you want one product to deliver a balanced ration alongside forage, particularly for horses that need simplicity or are difficult to keep in good condition. It is often practical where management time is limited or where the horse needs a dependable source of vitamins and minerals.

The advantage of a complete horse feed is that it can help build a balanced ration without lots of extra mixing. For horses on a forage-based diet, it can be a straightforward way to cover vitamins and minerals while adding calories and fibre in a more controlled way than cereal-heavy feeds.

That said, a complete horse feed is not automatically the answer for every horse. Some do better with forage and a ration balancer. Others need conditioning feed because they need more energy and protein. The best choice depends on body condition, workload, and how much forage the horse is already eating.

If the horse is a poor doer, older, or struggling to maintain condition through winter, a complete horse feed may be a practical option. If the horse is an easy keeper, a lighter balancer-based ration is often enough.

Spillers horse feed and other popular options

Spillers horse feed remains one of a number of well-known options available from horse feed companies in the UK. Many horse owners compare brands not just by reputation, but by how effectively the feed suits a horse's

winter fuel demands, digestive health, and body condition score.

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Typical products include conditioning feed, winter balancer options, fibre-based cubes, and complete horse feed formulations. A conditioning feed is often chosen for horses that need more weight or more topline fill. A winter balancer can work well for horses on mostly forage, especially where you want to deliver vitamins and minerals without adding many calories.

When comparing products from horse feed companies, study the nutrition label carefully. Look at protein, fibre, starch, and sugar, and think about how the feed balances the rest of the ration. A feed with lower starch may be a better choice for horses needing calm energy, while a conditioning feed may suit a horse needing more calorie density.

Brand matters less than suitability. Spillers horse feed may be the right fit for one horse, while another may do better on a different mix, cube, or balancer. The best approach is to match the feed to the horse, not the label.

How much does horse feed cost in winter?

Horse feed cost is an important part of winter planning because many horses need more forage, additional bedding, and sometimes a changed hard feed through the colder months. If you are wondering how much does horse feed cost, the simple answer is that it depends on the ration, the horse, and the feed value of the selected feeds.

Budgeting should start with the largest expense: forage. Hay and haylage are often the base of winter feeding, so it makes sense to weigh value by nutrition as well as price per bale or bag. A cheaper product is not good value if the horse needs far more of it or still loses condition.

Feed value is best judged by what you get per day, not just the shelf price. A more expensive complete horse feed may actually be cost-effective if it reduces the number of supplements and provides a balanced ration. A balancer can also be a good value if the horse does not need many extra calories.

When budgeting, remember to include:

- Forage and roughage
- Hard feed or conditioning feed
- Supplements or balancer
- Wastage from poor storage or refusal

The cheapest plan is not always the best one. The aim is to spend where it improves condition, digestive health, and winter stability.

Simple horse feed advice for winter management

Practical horse feed advice uk owners can rely on starts with a forage first mindset. If a horse is warm, calm, and staying in condition on forage and a balancer, there may be little reason to add more. If the horse is losing weight, increase forage quality or quantity before adding more bucket feed.

Blanket use also affects the ration. A horse wearing rugs may need less calorie support than an unclipped, exposed horse, because the blanket reduces energy spent on thermoregulation. That does not mean you should feed less automatically, but it is one factor in the overall plan.

Weight monitoring should be routine through winter. Use a body condition score, weigh tape, or both. Track changes in ribs, neck crest, topline, and overall coverage. Small changes are easier to correct than major losses later on.

Good winter care is about regularity: consistent feeding times, fresh water, enough forage, and thoughtful adjustment when conditions change.

Common mistakes to avoid when winter feeding

Winter feeding mistakes often come from trying to solve weight loss too quickly. Rapid diet changes can upset the gut, reduce intake, and increase the risk of digestive problems. Any feed transition should be step-by-step.

Another common issue is overfeeding starch. Too much starch and sugar can make some horses harder to manage and may increase laminitis risk in sensitive animals. High-starch rations can also be less forgiving when the horse is not working hard enough to use the energy efficiently.

Colic risk is another concern. Horses need consistent forage, fresh water, and a steady feeding routine. Long gaps between meals, poor hydration, or abrupt changes in forage or hard feed can all contribute to problems.

Other mistakes include:

- Relying on bucket feed instead of forage
- Overlooking body condition score
- Giving large meals instead of small meals
- Changing feeds too quickly
- Selecting a product based only on price or label claims

Winter feeding should protect gut health first, then maintain condition and workload.

How to build a winter feed plan

A good winter feed plan is straightforward, written down, and based on observation. Start by listing the forage available, the horse's current body condition score, and the workload. Then decide whether the horse needs only forage and a balancer, or whether it needs a harder-working ration with conditioning feed or complete horse feed.

If you want a practical horse feed mix recipe, think in terms of ingredients rather than exact brands: forage, a fibre-based base, a measured source of calories, and a balancer or supplement plan to cover vitamins and minerals. That might mean [low starch fibre feed](#) chopped fibre, cubes, oil, and a balancer, or a complete horse feed plus hay and fresh water. The exact mix should match the horse's needs and any digestive **overweight horse feed** sensitivities.

Create the feed schedule around regularity. Split the ration into modest meals and keep forage available as steadily as you can. Then reassess the plan every one to two weeks during winter and tweak for weight changes, weather, and exercise level.

For forage analysis, check dry matter, energy, protein, and sugar if you can. That helps you know whether the forage itself is doing most of the nutritional work or whether the horse needs more support from the bucket.

Quick quiz: what should I feed my horse?

Use this quick quiz as a decision guide rather than a strict rulebook. It can help you turn observation into a feeding decision.

- **What is the horse's body condition?** Thin, ideal, or overweight?
- **What is the work level?** Standing still, doing light work, or working at a higher level?
- **How good is the forage?** Plenty of hay or haylage, or limited roughage?
- **Does the horse need more calories or just better balance?**
- **Is digestive health stable?** Any signs of loose manure, poor appetite, or discomfort?

If the horse is in good condition, on decent forage, and not working hard, the answer is often forage plus balancer. If the horse is losing weight, the feeding decision may shift towards a conditioning feed or complete horse feed. If there are digestive concerns, a slower, fibre-led approach is usually safer.

FAQs about feeding horses in winter

What horse feed is best for horses in winter?

The best horse feed in winter is the one that supports the horse's body condition score, workload, and digestive health. For many horses, a forage-based diet with hay or haylage, plus a balancer, is enough. Horses that lose weight or work harder may need a complete horse feed or conditioning feed with controlled starch and sugar.

Do horses need more feed in winter?

Often, yes. Horses may have higher winter energy needs because they use more calories for thermoregulation. That does not always mean more hard feed, though. Many horses do better with more forage first, then a small increase in bucket feed only if needed for weight maintenance or work.

Is hay or hard feed better in cold weather?

For many horses, forage is preferable than hard feed as the primary winter feeding base. Hay and haylage aid roughage intake, gut health, and internal warmth through digestion. Hard feed has a place when more calories, protein, vitamins and minerals, or performance support are needed, but it should not replace forage.

How do I know if my horse is getting enough food in winter?

Check body condition score, weight trends, appetite, coat, droppings, and energy. If the horse is maintaining condition, has sound digestive health, and is bright and content, the ration is probably close to right. If the horse is losing weight, seems tucked up, or is leaving forage because it is insufficient or unpalatable, the ration needs review.

Can I change my horse's feed suddenly in winter?

No. Sudden diet changes can disturb the digestive system and increase the risk of colic. A feed transition should be gradual, especially when changing forage, adding hard feed, or switching to a new balancer or conditioning feed. Make adjustments gradually and monitor intake and behaviour closely.